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ABSTRACT

Effective communication between teachers and students is a very complex skill. In order to draw conclusions about effective youth-adult relationships, four research studies (Adolescent-Adult Relationships; Best and Poorest Junior High School Student-Teacher Relationships; Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions; and Comparison of Two Good Student-Teacher Relationships) were compared using a multidimensional model of interpersonal communication. The model consists of seven positive response roles, three of which are "self" roles (sharing, confrontation, encounter/encouragement) and four of which are "other" roles (feelings, thoughts, behavior, motives). Although the research studies varied in age of the youths studied, type of relationship, subject, and response format, many consistencies occurred. Good relationships were characterized by sharing, encounter/encouragement, and congruent communication roles between student and teacher. Motives, behavior, and confrontation were used least in good relationships. Poor relationships were characterized by confrontation and behavior, with thoughts being used least often. Overall, the pattern of use (frequency or proportion) of the responses may be more important in the quality of the relationship than frequency of any one response role. (BL)

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MULTIDIMENSIONAL COMMUNICATION IN YOUTH-ADULT RELATIONSHIPS

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Multidimensional Communication in Youth-Adult Relationships

by Judith Boser and William Poppen

At first glance it would appear that effective communication between teachers and students should not be a difficult task to achieve. Teachers are usually interested in youth, are of average or better intelligence and are college graduates. Therefore, by showing some attentiveness and at least a little common sense they should be able to communicate with their students. Unfortunately what would appear to be easy is not! Teachers frequently complain about how difficult it is to have a good relationship with some students even though they say they have tried everything imaginable with them. Students also commonly report to school counselors concern about ineffective relationships with teachers. Teachers are cited as a reason many students don't like school (Beelick, 1973) and as being less warm and kind than other adults (Thompson, 1975). Misunderstanding between students and teachers apparently is the order of the day!

Why does the misunderstanding exist? Those who have studied teacher-student communication have found that relationships are not easily improved. Procedures intended to modify relationships are only occasionally helpful and then only for a short while. For example, simply befriending the student does not have a generally positive effect on student behavior (Hawley, 1978). One general conclusion drawn from an extensive literature review is that teacher-student communication patterns are extremely com-

plex. No one theory about teacher-student relationships would seem to be sufficient, even though each theory offers something unique. It is no wonder psychologists write books and articles entitled Love Is Not Enough or Behaviorism Is Not Enough, they are expressing what was shown by the literature review -- one psychological theory is inadequate to explain complex interpersonal relationships. Further support for this idea can be gathered from the surveys which show that a large percentage of psychotherapists admit to being, in practice, eclectic (Dimond, 1978).

Many theories and ideas about teacher-student relationships exist. Each theory contains assumptions which translate into prescriptions about how teachers should act towards students. Almost without exception the prescriptions for teachers originated as skills for psychotherapists to use with patients and usually with adult patients. What was prescribed was usually that teachers talk in a specific manner. Examples of verbal interactions (dialogs) between teachers and students were found in all of the writings reviewed. Some studies would lead one to question whether or not the behaviors proposed for therapists to use with adult patients are equally appropriate for teachers to use with students (Reisman and Yamokoski, 1974; Venzor, Gillis and Beal, 1976).

The literature review resulted in a compilation of various ways authorities advocate that adults should communicate with youth. The findings of the literature review, plus some basic assumptions about teacher-student relationships led to the development of a multidimensional model of communication for adults and youth. The model includes seven basic verbal interaction roles for adults to use with youth.

One assumption of the multidimensional model is that healthy personalities are usually products of a series of facilitative relationships and that disturbed personalities are the result of a sequence of negative relationships. The teacher-student relationship has the potential to be one of these significant relationships, albeit positive or negative. In other words, teachers can make a real difference in the student's development.

Another assumption is that all relationships have significant moments, perhaps moments of conflict, which present an opportunity for growth or a potential for deterioration. During these significant moments how teachers talk to students can make an impact on the student. A further assumption is that at these critical times the major reason a relationship gets into difficulty is because the teacher responds consistently in one manner. To respond predictably is ineffective. If being consistent worked, the relationship would not have developed problems. Noticing the problem the teacher may be tempted to do "more of the same." The rationale of the teacher is, "If what I'm doing isn't working it is because I'm not doing enough of it." Persisting in a singular mode, the communication becomes progressively worse because what is needed is more variety. Effective interpersonal relationships appear to exhibit a variety of interactions or numerous facilitative interchanges. The good relationship is multidimensional! If we could observe an effective teacher-student relationship over an extended period, we would notice that at times the teacher responds primarily to the student while at other times the teacher is an expressor who shares his or her own thoughts and feelings with the student.

The variety of communication occurs as the teacher makes a decision about whether what is going on with the student is more important at that moment than what is going on within himself or herself. The teacher may generally place the student's needs first in the relationship but may recognize times when his or her own needs must be given top priority.

The multidimensional view of youth-adult relationships is based also upon the idea that the adult must be selective in responding to another person. It is nearly impossible to "read" people "in toto" without chaining together one's perceptions of the other person's behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and motives. Contrariwise when the adult is expressing himself or herself it is very difficult to separate one's own thoughts from one's feelings. There is a natural tendency to be congruent. Deceit must be learned and practiced otherwise nonverbal cues give people away.

The literature review and our assumptions fit together into an eclectic multidimensional model. Within the literature there was considerable agreement about what not to do when talking to youth. Nearly every theory advocated avoiding put-downs, quick advice and demeaning or belittling behaviors. Disagreement was about what should be done. Consequently the multidimensional model includes only positive or helpful ways of talking to youth. The model purports that as a responder to youth the adult can focus upon at least four aspects of the youth's communication. The teacher may attend to the student's feelings, "You're pretty scared about that." Or, the focus might be upon the behavior of the student. "What are you doing?" A third dimension to respond to verbally might be the ideas, thoughts or values of the student. "What do you think about - - -?"

Fourthly, a student's motives or goals might be ascertained by guessing via a "could it be" response.

The adult might decide to respond to himself or herself rather than the youth. When doing so the teacher becomes an expressor. One expressor role, sharing or self-disclosure may be made through a statement telling the student what the adult thinks or believes. The sharing generally is unrelated to the youth's behavior and is not an attempt to convert the youth to the adult's way of thinking. The two other expressor roles include one which is positive and one which is negative. The adult may feel a need to encounter the youth by saying, "I like you." Or, the confrontation may be used to share, "I'm upset about what you are doing." These are the seven verbal interaction roles incorporated into the multidimensional model. No one theory which was reviewed included all seven roles, and most theories proposed one or more variations of the seven response roles.

The Model

Clearly stated, the model of interpersonal communication consists of seven response roles--three which could be classified as "self" roles and four "other" roles. The relationship between the seven response roles in the model and some of the current theorists who have proposed their use in education is shown below.

Self	Sharing:	Amidon, 1972; Jourard, 1971; Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966
	Confrontation:	Ginott, 1972; Gordon, 1974
	Encounter/ Encouragement:	Dreikurs, Greenwald & Pepper, 1971; Ginott, 1972; Rogers, 1974

Other	Feelings:	Carkhuff & Pierce, 1976; Ginott, 1972; Gordon, 1974
	Thoughts:	Glasser, 1969; Raths, Harmin, & Simon, 1966
	Behavior:	Glasser, 1969
	Motives:	Dreikurs, Greenwald & Pepper, 1971

The encounter role, as applied to education, has been expanded to include encouragement, which frequently appears in education literature. While the original model (Poppen, 1975) also included an eighth role (problem-solving) it was omitted in the student-teacher studies since it encompassed more than one of the other roles and seemed to be a composite of them.

Completed Research

Data are available from four studies which have investigated the use of the response roles in good and poor relationships between youth and adults. Although the studies differ, some conclusions can be drawn.

Adolescent-Adult Relationships

Fifty undergraduate university students enrolled in a family studies course were the subjects for the first study (Poppen & White, 1976). Subjects rated the communication behavior of two adults: one with whom they had had a nearly ideal relationship and one with whom they had had a poor relationship (excluding parents).

Subjects were asked to write a paragraph describing an adult with whom they had had one of the two types of relationships. They then responded to an instrument consisting of 32 written statements, four representing each of the eight communication roles in the original model: thoughts, feelings,

motives, behavior, confronting, encountering, sharing, and problem-solving. The students responded to each statement using a 5-point Likert response format (1=Strongly Agree; 5=Strongly Disagree) indicating to what extent the communication behavior described in the statement was characteristic of the person they had described. (This was the only study which included the problem-solving role.)

In addition to describing and rating the communication behavior of one type of relationship, the student followed the same process of writing a description and reporting the communication behavior of an adult with whom the student had had the other type of relationship. Half of the students described a nearly ideal relationships first while the other half began with a poor relationship.

Totals were computed for each of the eight roles separately for nearly ideal and poor relationships by adding the ratings of the four items for that role. In comparing the mean scores for each role of ideal with poor relationships, t-tests confirmed that the adults in nearly ideal relationships used each of the response roles to a significantly greater extent than did the adults in poor relationships. In addition, even the role used least in nearly ideal relationships (motives) had a higher mean than the role used most in poor relationships (confronting).

Best and Poorest Junior High School Student-Teacher Relationships

In the second study, 109 ninth grade students were asked to report their perceptions of the communication behavior of the teacher with whom they had had the best student-teacher relationship in junior high school grades (7-9) and the teacher with whom they had had the poorest relationship (Boser & Poppen, 1978).

As in the previous study, students wrote descriptions of the two teachers. After all students had written their first description (half of the students were selected randomly to describe the poorest relationship first while the other half began with the best relationship), the students were shown a series of videotape vignettes in which a student and a teacher demonstrated each response role. The videotape script had been developed by finding dialogues in current literature representative of the response roles. After each response role was demonstrated the subjects indicated how frequently the teacher had used that particular type of communication with them on a 5-point scale (1=Very Often; 2=Often; 3=Sometimes; 4=Seldom; 5=Never).

A Wilcoxon signed-ranks test was used to compare the frequency with which each role was used in the best and poorest relationships. While most response roles were used significantly more ($p < .0001$) in best relationships than in poorest (feelings, thoughts, encounter/encouragement, sharing, motives), one of the response roles (confrontation) was used significantly more in poorest relationships, contrary to the findings of the first study. The behavior role was also used more in poorest relationships but the difference was not significant.

Elementary School Teachers' Perceptions

Departing from the perceptions of students, the third study focused on elementary school teachers' perceptions of their own behavior with students with whom they had had good and poor relationships (Boser & Poppen, 1979). Twenty-four elementary school teachers who were enrolled in a University graduate course in Educational Psychology and Guidance were the subjects.

The teachers followed a procedure similar to that of the junior high school students in the second study, differing only in that: 1) the teachers described the students with whom they had had the good and poor relationships, and 2) after watching each videotape dialogue the teachers indicated how frequently they, themselves, had used that type of communication with the student rather than reporting on the behavior of the other person (student).

The results of using a Wilcoxon signed-ranks test for each role, comparing the frequency ratings in good and poor relationships, showed that sharing ($p=.055$) was the only role not used significantly more in one type of relationship than in the other ($p<.05$). Encounter/encouragement, feelings, and thoughts were used more in good relationships while confrontation, behavior, and motives were more characteristic of poor relationships. The videotape scenes in which the latter three roles were demonstrated showed situations arising from student misbehavior. The teachers did not see themselves responding to misbehavior in these ways as frequently in good as in poor relationships, possibly because there were fewer incidences of student misbehavior in good relationships as defined by the teacher or because the teacher responded in a different manner to the misbehavior of students with whom they felt they had good relationships.

Comparison of Two Good Student-Teacher Relationships

Ninety ninth grade students followed the same procedures as had the ninth grade students in the second study except that instead of describing the best and poorest student-teacher relationships they had had in junior high school grades, they described two good relationships (Boser, 1981). The purpose of this study was to determine whether students tended to form good relationships with teachers who exhibited the same type of behavior toward them or whether they sought a variety of types of response through relationships with different teachers.

The general procedure was the same as that of the two previous student-teacher relationship studies with two additions. First, after describing a relationship, the student rated the overall quality of the relationship on a 1-7 scale; and second, after the videotape was shown and the student had reported the frequency of teacher use of each response role, the student ranked the three roles used most in the relationship so that it was possible to identify the one role used most in each relationship. The major focus of interest was on comparing the role used most by the second teacher with that used most by the first teacher to see whether they were the same or different for that student.

The frequency with which each response role was used most for the two teachers was tabulated. Each role was used most often by some teachers in good relationships. The question to be answered was whether the same role predominated for both teachers described by a student.

A conditional binomial probability model was used, leading to the conclusion that students did tend to relate to teachers who communicated with them in the same way. The total of 34 matches (same role ranked first for both teachers described by the student) for the 90 subjects was significant ($p < .05$). In other words, students had a construct which included the dominant type of teacher communication for teachers with whom they formed good relationships.

Discussion of Research and Conclusions

There are some inconsistencies in the research findings, but these may simply provide different pieces to fit into the puzzle of interpersonal relationships since different research questions were asked and different types of subjects were used. First of all, three of the studies were restricted to student-teacher relationships while the other had an almost unrestricted range of adults (excluding parents) with whom the students might have developed re-

lationships.

Another difference is in the age level at which the student or youth experienced the relationship. The teachers reported their behavior with elementary school students while the two studies done with students were concerned with relationships during junior high school years and the undergraduates reported on relationships when they were adolescents. Among the three student-teacher relationship studies, two focused on student perceptions of the teacher's behavior while the third consisted of self-report data obtained from the teachers.

Differences in results may, therefore, be a reflection of one or more of the following:

1. Nature of the person reporting. Self reports of teacher behavior may differ from reports of students for the same teachers.
2. Type of relationship. There may be differences between what constitutes a good relationship with a teacher and with other adults.
3. Age of the students. As students grow from elementary school students to adolescents, the ways in which they relate to adults may change, thus changing the nature of the communication and the type of adult communication inherent in good and poor relationships. Even within the more limited context of student-teacher relationships, what constitutes a good relationship may change as the student goes from elementary grades to junior high school, and this change is reflected in teacher communication.
4. Quality of relationship for youth or adult. A relationship might be good from the adult's perspective but not from that of the youth.

The comparison of the statistical results obtained in the four studies shown in Table 1 suggests the following conclusions:

1. Encounter/encouragement, thoughts, and feelings are used significantly more in good than in poor relationships in elementary and junior high school student-teacher relationships and in adolescent-adult relationships.
2. Sharing is used more frequently in good relationships than in poor ones although not always to a significant extent. When students and adolescents report on adult behavior the difference is significant but not when teachers report their own behavior with elementary school students. This may be a function of either the age of the students or the person reporting.
3. Confrontation is used significantly more in poor student-teacher relationships but significantly more in good adolescent-adult relationships. This could be an indication of a difference in the type of relationship since adolescents were free to choose a good relationship with any adult.
4. Behavior is also used more frequently in poor student-teacher relationships (significantly so in only one of the two studies however) but significantly more often in good relationships of adolescents with adults.
5. Motives is used significantly more in poor student-teacher relationships with elementary school students but significantly more in good junior high school student-teacher relationships and adolescent-adult relationships. Again, as in the second instance, age of the youth or person reporting may account for the difference in results.

There seems to be little doubt that the communication in youth-adult relationships is multidimensional and that students and adults can differentiate between good and poor relationships with respect to the adult's use of the response roles. Some roles are consistently used more in good relationships while at least one is more characteristic of poor relationships.

Insert Table 1 about here

In spite of differences such as age of the youth, type of relationship, subject, and response format some consistencies also occur in the rank orders of the studies as can be observed in Table 2.

1. In good relationships:
   a. Sharing tends to be the predominant role
   b. Encounter/encouragement are also likely to be used more than most of the other response roles.
   c. Motives, behavior, and confrontation are usually used least.
   d. Any one of the response roles could be the one used more for some student.
   e. Students develop good relationships with teachers who exhibit the same predominant communication role toward them.
2. In poor relationships:
   a. Confrontation and behavior seem to be used most often.
   b. Thoughts are generally used least often.
3. In comparing good and poor relationships:
   a. The most striking differences in ranking occurred with confrontation and behavior which are among the roles used most in poor relationships and least (along with motives) in good relationships.

Table 1

Statistical Results

Study	Roles Used More in Good Relationships	Roles Used More in Poor Relationships
1. Adolescent-Adult	All**	
2. Junior High Student-Teacher	Feelings***	Confrontation*
	Thoughts***	Behavior (n.s.)
	Encounter/Encouragement***	
	Sharing***	
	Motives***	
3. Elementary School Student-Teacher	Thoughts***	Confrontation*
	Feelings**	Behavior*
	Encounter/Encouragement*	Motives*
	Sharing (n.s.)	

*p .05

**p .001

***p .0001

b. Motives responses are used fairly infrequently in both relationships although other roles may be used less. There is not a great deal of difference in the relative ranking of motives responses in the two relationships.

c. In general, more communication takes place in good relationships than in poor ones with respect to the seven response roles.

Insert Table 2 about here

It may be that the pattern of use (relative frequencies or porportion of use) of the responses is more important in the quality of the relationships than the overall frequency of any one role. It is important to remember that while the studies cited were concerned with youth-adult relationships, the original theoretical model upon which they were based was not this limited in scope nor are the applications of current theorists.

Table 2

Rank Order of Response Roles by Frequency of Use in Good and Poor Relationships

Relationship	Study			
	Adolescent/Adult[a]	Junior High Student-Teacher	Elementary Student-Teacher	Junior High (Good only)
Good	1. Sharing 18.1[b]	1. Sharing 2.198[c]	1. Encounter/Enc. 1.46[c]	1. Sharing 71[d]
	2. Encounter 17.5	2. Encounter/Enc. 2.218	2. Feelings 1.79	2. Encounter/Enc. 35
	3. Behavior 17.0	3. Feelings 2.228	3. Thoughts 2.33(tie)	3. Feelings 29
	4. Thoughts 16.8	4. Thoughts 2.564	4. Sharing 2.33(tie)	4. Confrontation 19
	5. Feelings 16.7	5. Motives 3.069	5. Behavior 2.875	5. Thoughts 10(tie)
	6. Confrontation 15.3	6. Behavior 3.347	6. Confrontation 2.96	6. Motives 10(tie)
	7. Motives 14.1	7. Confrontation 3.396	7. Motives 3.04	7. Behavior 8
Poor	1. Confrontation 13.6	1. Confrontation 1.941	1. Encounter/Enc. 1.79	
	2. Behavior 11.7	2. Behavior 3.079	2. Confrontation 2.46(tie)	
	3. Encounter 11.5	3. Sharing 3.830	3. Behavior 2.46(tie)	
	4. Sharing 11.1	4. Motives 3.851	4. Feelings 2.58	
	5. Motives 10.7	5. Encounter/Enc. 4.228	5. Sharing 2.63	
	6. Thoughts 10.1	6. Feelings 4.337	6. Motives 2.76	
	7. Feelings 9.1	7. Thoughts 4.356	7. Thoughts 3.17	
Range	5-20	1-5	1-5	

[a] Problem-solving role deleted

[b] Mean: High mean denotes high frequency of use

[c] Mean: Low mean denotes high frequency of use

[d] Total number of times role was predominant role for both good relationships

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